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ABSTRACT

Despite the early and well-received presentation of ideas foundational to modern rhetorical theory, Susanne K. Langer's accomplishments are rarely credited in the work of other scholars. What Langer did, so essential to the rebirth of rhetoric, was to represent meaning as both socially constructed and achieved collaboratively by rhetor and audience. Breaking with earlier tradition and prevailing thought in the 1940s by refocusing three key concerns with language, Langer (1) suggested the purpose of symbolization is not just communication, nor primarily communication, but rather a unique human need to express individual conceptions of the world, to create form, and, so, a reality; (2) broadened the understanding of what reason is by connecting all human thought to feeling, that is, the "sensuous experience" of the world; and (3) portrayed an interactive relationship of mutual interpretation between the rhetor and audience whose thoughts and language are pinioned by society. These concerns found their way into the works of many rhetoricians, providing substance to the claim that Langer was the mother of modern rhetoric because of her pioneering work which defined language as more than persuasion and traded token, and celebrated language as creating reality and community. (Six references are appended.) (MS)

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Susanne K. Langer: A Rhetorical Theory from Her Work

A woman can speak with innovation and precision, be heard by more than a million people, and still not be recognized. Due to a dramatic failure of attribution, the American philosopher Susanne Langer -- a significant, early force in the revival of rhetoric -- remains unacknowledged for her contributions to modern thought. She developed and popularized the modern vision of language as emotive, creative, and multifarous: structuring our perceptions, expressing our experiences, creating and communicating knowledge within a community. Langer presented this celebratory view of language with a clarity and fervor that guarenteed its acceptance. There can be no doubt of her influence when all but one of her nine philosophy books are still in print decades after publication -- most in multiple edition. Philosophy in a New Key alone has sold over 500,000 copies. Despite her early and well-received presentation of ideas foundational to modern rhetorical theory, her accomplishment is rarely credited in the work of other scholars.

The Western tradition of rhetoric links speech, community, and individual thought. And throughout its

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history, small, quiet statements suggesting a rhetorical epistemology -- a social construction of meaning -- have been made by rhetorians and philosophers such as Isocrates, Vico, and Blair. What Langer did, so essential to the rebirth of rhetoric, was represent meaning as both socially constructed and acheived collaboratively by rhetor and audience. Her theory -- complete, compelling, and accessible -- nurtured the development of a generation of rhetoricians.

For us to understand the historical impact of Langer's ideas, we must see how she broke with the mainstream thought of the forties. Countering prevailing thought, her 1942 book Philosophy in a New Key, refocused three key concerns with language.

(1) According to Langer, the purpose of symbolization is not just communication, nor primarily communication -- but rather - a unique human need to express individual conceptions of the world, to create form and, so, a reality. In arguing for an expressive theory of language, she wrote, "If our basic needs were just those of lower creatures much refined, we should have a more realistic language than in fact we have" (Key 8). To paraphrase, our fascination with poetry and myth is evidence of our need to do more with language than ask to have the bread passed. Inherent in redefining the purpose of speech is a diminishment of

Aristotelian emphasis on persuasion -- and a strengthening of emphasis on context.

(2) Moving against the prevalent view of "reason as inductive or deductive logic," Langer broadened the understanding of what our reason is by connecting all human thought to feeling -- that is, our "sensuous experience" of the world. In classifying all symbolic transformations as rational and intellectual -- sonnet and song as well as science -- Langer fostered the study of the emotional and moral aspects of language, the traditional territory of the rhetorician.

(3) and most important and elaborate -- she broke with mechanistic models of interpretation and portrayed an interactive relationship of mutual interpretation between the rhetor and audience whose thoughts and language are pinioned by society. Her model of mutual, ongoing expression, contrained by the conventions of the community, inaugurated modern theories of negotiated meaning.

Langer placed social order and shared meaning at the first moment of speech. She speculated that language developed after dreams, superstition, and ritual, that language had its ancient origins in the dancing and voice play of a hominid tribe. Their elaborate ululations coupled with gesture and dance bonded the tribe. In ritualistic group behavior, meaning accrued to sounds that accompanied

actions, so that the whole tribe shared in concept formation. While individuals may have had unique conceptions, the group concept of the action would be uniform. The chant that accompanied the act of shaking a stick at the moon would acquire the proposition "Shake a stick at the moon." Song and ritual, repeated rhythm and pattern, precipitated language.

This communal origin of language and her theory of symbolic transformation enabled Langer to show her readers that thinking, society, and language are inseparable. Her work forged the links of this complex relationship and tested the movement possible in this bond. As well, she explored the significance of context to the communication of all meaning. Langer believed a speaker and her listeners make meaning most naturally in an interactive context where their individual meanings or conceptions are created and reinforced by the concepts of common experience and common articulation (Key 240). Context is not just the moment but also the society. When a speaker uses language, even for private purposes, she must use a language formed through history by society's needs. Therefore, even our individual thoughts tie us to our society. Langer writes:

> The formulation of thought by language, which makes every person a member of a particular society, involves him more deeply with his own people than any "social attitude" or "community of

> interests" could do; for this original mental bond holds the hermit, the solitary outlaw, and the excommunicate as surely as the most perfectly adjusted citizen. Whatever brute fact may be, our experience of it bears the stamp of language (Feeling 220).

The listener can hear and interpret a speaker's language, in other words, because their experience has been stamped in this shared symbolic form.

While, Langer believes, an individual may have a burst of individual insight mediated by metaphor, society monitors and contributes to these insights. She writes, "every society meets a new idea with its concepts, its own tacit, fundamental way of seeing things; that is to say, with its own questions, its peculiar curiousity". Meaning is interpreted within a community.

Langer's three breaks with earlier traditions are breaks associated with modern rhetorical theory. In this decade, rhetoricians know that language is more than a telegraphic system of communication. We value the moral and emotional aspects of language at least as highly as the logical. And by and large, we have accepted a rhetorical epistomology -- mutual interpretation within the conventions of a community. Langer introduced many of us to these ideas. As well, she introduced many of these ideas.

Some might suggest that Kenneth Burke introduced these ideas in the thirties, and he is the rhetorician who is closest to Langer in thought and chronology. In the tradition of Isocrates, Vico, and Blair, he does draw relationships between the individual, society, and language and extolls the importance of context -- first in his 1931 book Counter-statement and then more explicitly in Permanence and Change -- 1935. While, at this time, he was moving toward his later, more holistic and Langer-like position, his theory of language always remained comparatively fragmentary and persuasion centered -- Like Aristotle, he developed taxonomies and defines language as manipulative. For example in Permanence and Change, he wrote:

> Speech takes its shape from the fact that it is used by people acting together. It is an adjunct of action -- and thus naturally contains the elements of exhortation and threat which guide and stimulate action . . .the moral elements in our vocabulary are symbolic warfare. (191-2)

For Burke, language is a force we use on one another. And while here -- very early -- he believes that meaning is societal and situational, only later does he see language as creating identity -- joined interest (544) -- between individuals. He asserted this view first in his 1954 A Rhetoric of Motives where he described language "as a

symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (567). But even after asserting that language joined interests and induced cooperation, he never defines mutual interpretation between individuals as richly as Langer.

Collaborative meaning and discourse communities, presented by Langer in the forties, became part of rhetoric in the fifties -- with Burke's later work and Perlman and Orbrechts-Tyteca's The New Rhetoric. In 1958, Perlman and Orbrechts-Tyteca insist that "all argumentation aims at gaining the adherence of minds, and, by this very fact, assumes the existence of an intellectual contract" (14). . .Every social circle or milieu is distinguishable in terms of its dominant opinions and unquestioned beliefs, of the premises that it takes for granted with out hesitation" (20). This is very much like Langer's description of eaching society having "its own questions, its peculiar curiousity." A more recent descendent of Langer's work, Stanley Fish, has written of the interpretive communites in the classroom.

Clearly, wide acceptence of Langer's earlier work blazed the path for these theorists. Scholars in philosophy, rhetoric, and literature already had heard large parts of these arguments proven by Susanne Langer. Therefore, I insist that Susanne Langer was both midwife and mother at the rebirth of rhetoric. She eased the rebirth of

rhetoric by kindling the ideas and questions necessary to attract an active community of rhetoricians. Her million readers were exposed to the ideas basic to modern theory: some used her ideas as a foundation for forming their own systems of rhetorical belief, and others used her ideas to understand and evaluate the theorists who came later. She was a midwife at the rebirth of rhetoric.

More significantly, she was the mother of modern rhetoric, not simply because she was the major female figure writing at that time, but because of her foundational work (or labor) -- which defined language as more than persuasion and traded token -- which celebrated language as creating reality and community. For these insights, we must recognize Susanne Langer as the mother of this century's complex, non-Aristotelian rhetorical epistemology.

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